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"The Littlest Balls Ever Company" The Analysis of a Five-Year-Old Boy

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This paper describes the two-and-a-half year analysis of a five year old boy, Nick. Apart from the intrinsic interest that most child analytic cases hold, there are two especially noteworthy features of this analysis. First, Nick underwent an extensive psychological evaluation at the hands of the treating analyst some months before the treatment began. Thus, the case provides data about how that prior relationship affected the analytic process that evolved. Second, Nick initiated a project with the analyst that he named "the littlest balls ever factory." This project continued throughout the treatment, representing a variety of complex meanings. Although the genital and specifically testicular allusions in the name of this project seem obvious, the analyst came to understand that the project represented an equally important ego function: i.e., the enactment of an obsessional defensive process that allowed more dangerous and forbidden fantasies to emerge (A. Freud, 1936). This project represents a cautionary tale about not jumping to obvious conclusions. Nevertheless, the analyst was left with more questions than answers about the function of this all-important game to the patient.

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Consultation

NICK'S PARENTS, MR. AND MS. D, CAME FOR CONSULTATION REGARDING psychological assessment in May, 1996 when Nick was five years old. They were concerned about his angry and violent outbursts in response to limit setting at home and school, especially having threatened to "kill" his teacher.

Nick was the younger of two children in an intact family. He attended a pre-school, which he expected to continue into kindergarten. His sister Kate was three years older. She was in treatment with Dr. L, who had referred Nick to me for psychological assessment. Kate was described by her parents as being "on strike," refusing to do school work or to conform to school and home requirements.

Ms. D, had completed a Ph.D. but apart from some occasional at-home editorial work, she was not employed outside the home; Mr. D had worked in finance but was between jobs when they first came to see me. Both parents were in their own treatments, Mr. D in therapy and Ms. D in analysis; both suffered from depression, and there were serious marital problems that had caused a great deal of tension at home. They reported that Nick had once remarked that his parents were so busy fighting that they wouldn't notice if he fell out of a window; he once even opened a window when he became very angry at his mother.

Mr. D complained that he often experienced his wife as being emotionally unavailable. He also reported that he had made two serious suicide attempts, the last in the mid-1980s. In addition, he had recently been diagnosed with a serious and worsening, though not life threatening, physical ailment which made him feel even more vulnerable. He had just been eased out of his high-powered position with a generous severance package and was looking for a new business venture. At that time, he was seriously depressed, despite being in the care of a therapist and psychopharmacologist, and was spending a fair amount of time in bed.

Nick, born in 1991, was the result of a planned pregnancy and an unremarkable vaginal delivery. Ms. D's mother had died shortly before Nick's birth, leaving Ms. D very depressed and angry. She worried that she was not being a good mother.

Despite Ms. D's depression, she was able to enjoy nursing her son, though Nick weaned himself after six months. Although his mother didn't fall “in love” with him immediately as she did with her daughter, she claimed to have this feeling by the end of Nick's first year.

Nick was quite resistant to toilet training. However, at age four while

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his parents were away for two weeks, he was toilet trained by his sitter. At the time of the consultation, he was also bathing himself and brushing his own teeth.

Though Nick's gross motor milestones had been age appropriate, his expressive language development was delayed, with words at 18 months and multi-word utterances at two years. His frustration at not being able to express himself adequately was visible to his parents, who reported that he continued to show some frustration when he was not understood, often refusing to repeat what he had said.

Nick was not particularly oppositional between ages two to three, and there was no history of excessive masturbatory activity. Separations had been something of a difficulty, especially when he began pre-school; it took about a month for him to separate comfortably. He frequently verbalized his unhappiness about his mother's going out in the evenings. At the time of the consultation, at age five, Nick still sucked his thumb when he was anxious or tired, and remained attached to several transitional objects from his crib. Nick's parents used five minute time-outs for discipline and Mr. D wondered if Nick indulged in negative attention seeking behavior.

Nick's parents reported that his teachers thought that he had high intellectual capacities. His fine motor skills were somewhat delayed, as was his phonological articulation; gross motor skills were reported intact. Nick's parent described him as a “very emotionally connected” child, though not as cuddly as his sister. He sometimes resisted being touched. He slept in his own room but had always been a light sleeper and was sometimes reluctant to go to bed. Apart from the occasional bad dream, no significant sleep disturbances were noted.

Potentially traumatic episodes include the following: at the age of three Nick was hospitalized overnight for undiagnosed stomach pain; the family dog had died of a heart attack two years before the consultation, and was buried in a spot the children sometimes visited; Ms. D's grandmother had suffered a serious stroke recently, though the children had not yet seen her by the time of the consultation; a year and a half earlier Mr. D had been hospitalized for 26 hours with chest pain.

In my conversation with Nick's teacher, she reported that he was one of the brightest children in class and appeared interested in many things. He was good at occupying himself, and though he had not sought much peer interaction early in the year, he had recently made some friends. Nick was generally loving, sweet, and affectionate, but his teacher was concerned about his sudden temper outbursts. Nick could become quickly enraged if another child entered

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his space or knocked something of his over; she emphasizes that the precipitant was often a small matter which Nick had the verbal skills to handle otherwise. At those times, he appeared to shake with rage, sometimes saying “I'll kill you” or “I wish you'd die.” Sometimes Nick continued to mutter angry threats to himself for hours.

Summary of the Psychological Evaluation

Nick was a charming youngster of average height and weight. He separated easily from his mother, and despite some initial shyness, he was well related and cooperative throughout the evaluation. His effort and concentration were generally good; when he became tired or distracted, he was responsive to redirection.

On gross observation, expressive and receptive language were age-appropriate; some mild articulation difficulties were noted, but Nick could be easily understood. His pragmatic use of language was also appropriate. Syntactic analysis indicated the ability to use complex, embedded sentences along with some inconsistencies in Nick's use of obligatory syntactic markers. This sort of uneven linguistic functioning is characteristic of the language acquisition process in the early school years.

Nick was found to be a youngster whose average ability to process information and to solve novel problems in a sequential mode was far outstripped by his superior ability to solve tasks which required holistic processing. His linguistic skills were at average to above-average levels, with receptive abilities stronger than expressive; mild articulation difficulties were noted. Gross and fine motor skills indicated mild to moderate delays. Academic performance was found to be average to above-average, with a relative weakness in reading/decoding skills. Variability in functioning across all domains

suggested that Nick's true capacity was likely to be higher than his current performance.

Psychodynamic evaluation indicated that Nick was inhibited or distracted from optimal functioning by a variety of conflicts related to rage and aggression. These affected his cognitive performance. Nick's conflicts over aggression were also related to the presenting complaints by parents and teachers and appeared to be interfering with his development of an adequate masculine identity. These conflicts also seemed to be inhibiting his ability to engage others more openly and freely and to allow himself spontaneous and creative self-expression.

I told his parents that Nick probably did not require speech or physical/occupational therapy unless delays in these areas caused

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him frustration at school or with peers. Given his relatively weak reading/decoding skills and his excellent holistic processing abilities, Nick was thought to be a good candidate for reading instruction through the whole-word approach; a phonics approach would probably prove more difficult because of its sequential nature.

Finally, I felt that Nick would greatly benefit from intensive treatment. He needed help to integrate his aggression so as to both fuel age-appropriate competitive strivings and to promote the development of a more flexible, spontaneous character structure. Nick seemed to be desperately and ineffectively trying to manage his rage and aggression through excessive inhibition. At the time of assessment, he seemed at risk for developing a character structure that alternated between depressive affect and angry outbursts.

Before recommending analysis to Nick's parents, I sought consultation about whether it was advisable for me to undertake the treatment, in view of the fact that I had three meetings with Nick in which my role as tester required me to probe, urge, and question him. I worried that our initial relationship might impede the establishment of a more neutral analytic relationship. It was decided that I should try to undertake the treatment, keeping in mind that the nature of our testing relationship would likely manifest itself as a factor that would require analytic work.

Indications for psychoanalysis were presented to Nick's parents. Their immediate response was to lament that their family was a like a vehicle that had broken down, and required so many mechanics to fix. I empathized with their concern, but observed that they seemed to be trying hard to get things repaired. After some more thought, they agreed to a three-time-a-week schedule to begin in the fall.

Course of Treatment

Nick seemed a bit reluctant when I first saw him in September. He shrugged when I asked why he thought he was coming to see me. I told him I understood that he was having some trouble with his temper, that kids sometimes felt bad about that sort of thing, and that perhaps I could help him with that. Nick had no apparent reaction to my comment. I also indicated that although we had worked in one way earlier, we'd be working in a somewhat different way now, that he would be free to play and speak to me without my asking him so many questions, as I had done before.

In addition to exploring the toys and other aspects of my office, Nick's early hours were taken up with the “fixing” theme. He noticed

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all sorts of little cracks, holes, and chips in my office that he felt required fixing, and he often concocted elaborate plans to do so. I commented on his wish to be “fixed” by me and also to his turning this passive wish to active—that is, he would become the “fixer.” In response to one comment that perhaps he wanted something about himself fixed, Nick replied that he wanted to be rid of some spiders on his window sill. I replied that maybe there were some scary things inside himself that he wanted to be rid of also.

In our first meeting after Nick's treatment began, his parents reported that Nick was complaining that he didn't want to come to treatment, that he had threatened to throw me out the window (my office is on the ground floor), and that I “made him work so that other kids could play.” At the time, I wondered if this last comment related to my having tested Nick, though as the treatment evolved, the “work” theme became so important and pervasive, that I came to believe that it had more long-standing roots than our previous encounter. The “work” theme also reminded me of Nick's response to my comment about the many nonsense songs he kept making up during his early hours: I asked if singing constantly kept him from being scared, and he replied, “They keep me busy.” Apparently, there was something important about someone working so that others could play and about keeping busy.

Nick's parents continued to report temper tantrums at home, though these had stopped at school. It seemed that Mr. D's

frequent complaint that Nick didn't get enough attention from Ms. D was a projection of his own accusation against his wife. He apparently felt he was competing with Nick for Ms. D's attention. I wondered whether he was also competing with his wife for my attention. Mr. D voiced a concern about what he perceived as a homosexual manner in Nick's dancing and body language. I too had observed the somewhat “feminine” postures and commented on what I believed to be one aspect of this issue: since Mr. D had recently been spending a good deal of time depressed, in bed, and out of work; perhaps his son had retreated from identifying with him as a strong male figure.

The work theme, which had already been foreshadowed, arose consistently throughout the treatment. It began with Nick's giving me lots of “work” to do, instructing me to make various things, often while he did nothing or played with some toy. At first I noted that he liked to keep me busy while he relaxed. Always attentive to the effects of my earlier assessment of Nick, I also wondered aloud whether this had something to do with my having made him work so hard when

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we first met, a comment that elicited neither confirmation nor disconfirmation.

My “work” evolved into the “littlest balls ever” project: Nick or I or both of us, would cut paper into tiny pieces; I would roll them into tiny balls, which would be contained in “pockets” or packages, of paper. Sometimes he would insist that I count the balls, which could number 70 or more. I experienced both these jobs as quite tedious, while Nick seemed to enjoy ordering me around, which I commented on. He agreed, informing me that he was the boss of the company while I was the worker, and that the balls were a product which our “business” or “company” would sell to get rich. I wondered aloud whether he was trying to be like his father, a man who developed various businesses, though this comment had no apparent effect. I also wondered to what extent Nick was enacting his father's resentment about working hard while his wife refused to find full-time work to help support the family, a complaint Mr. D had voiced for years.

After some months, the tedious, repetitive nature of the “littlest balls ever” task seemed like the enactment of an obsessional defense. At times when we both worked on “the littlest balls,” I would comment that we were spending so much time on the balls that there was no time to think about anything else. At other times, when Nick assigned me this task while he played or relaxed on my couch, I commented that perhaps he could feel free to do whatever he wanted because I was busy making the balls; one response to this comment was Nick's repeating in a singsong: “you gotta work while I play.” Our “company” was called “Nick and Anne's Littlest Balls Ever Company,” and Nick insisted that we create advertisements as well as a manual that, on separate pages, described the “product,” the process of making the balls, and a statement from me, the “worker,” detailing how I liked working for the company.

Throughout the treatment, Ms. D was very cooperative, sometimes leaving me messages about dreams her son had told her, often containing themes of body anxiety or loss. I suggested that she urge Nick to share the dreams with me. Mr. D, however, was becoming increasingly oppositional and hostile both to Nick's treatment and to me, complaining, for example, that he couldn't believe that after three months, his son was still not discussing his dreams with me and he was still having temper tantrums at home. I told Mr. D that I was less concerned about Nick's tantrums than I was about the fact that he seemed to have developed a masochistic character style (an unfortunate

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identification with his father): that is, he was expressing his anger at others by threatening to hurt himself (he'd threatened to stop eating for three days if his parents punished him), and that I continued to feel that this problem could best be addressed in a more intensive treatment. Because I also felt that Mr. and Ms. D were using our consultations to fight with each other, I suggested separate meetings. These separate meetings turned out to be quite successful, in part because Mr. D no longer felt he was competing with his wife for my attention. After one meeting apiece, in which both parents reported improvements in Nick's mood and a lessening of tantrums, they agreed to a fourth hour for him. As Mr. D's depression lifted and he returned to work, both parents could see the relationship between this event and the improvements in Nick, including an increased wish to spend time with Mr. D, whom he would avoid when the latter was at his worst.

When I told Nick about the additional hour, he responded with excitement. He also voiced curiosity about my personal life for the first time: my “kids,” where I lived, etc. My response—that it might be better to understand what he was imagining than for me to answer—seemed to satisfy him. I wondered whether his response to the additional hour included the fantasy that he had joined my family.

In the following months, Nick's play continued to be highly creative, and he involved me in his elaborate plans and constructions. He seemed to have an unlimited sense of what it was possible to construct (including a vacuum cleaner!) and never seemed frustrated if things didn't work out as planned; he almost instantly had an alternative idea. Nick seemed to be an “idea man” in every sense of the phrase. He understood the world through elaborate ideas, and he knew far more about

how things in the world worked than would be expected at his age.

Thus it was striking that before most of our breaks Nick appeared at a loss for a play activity. When I commented on this, he replied several times that he was “out of ideas.” I understood this to mean that he was experiencing a kind of depletion of his inner resources, a loss of his most adaptive defense. The reliance on ideas seemed due both to Nick's innate intelligence and to his mother's tendency to provide him with elaborate explanations for everything (**Hartman, 1958**). But Nick's exuberance and willingness to experiment (he often said we were doing scientific experiments) also seemed to come from parents who genuinely supported and facilitated all sorts of experiments at home that would further his education and imagination.

Themes following the addition of the fourth hour were both sexual

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and aggressive in nature, including primal scene material and giving me baby equivalents, as well as exploding bombs near my house or in my office. It seemed that the excitement generated by the addition of the fourth hour allowed more charged themes to override the obsessional activity of making little balls. Nick introduced the use of a pretend microscope and an X-ray machine (my desk lamp). I commented on how curious he was, especially about the inside of people's bodies; I added that curiosity was a good thing for our coming to understand things about him.

As a way of mastering his body anxiety and enacting his curiosity about bodies, Nick began to regularly perform surgery on cut out paper people, removing damaged body parts and replacing them with new ones. During this period his anxiety was increased by a ruptured eardrum that required treatment. A religious theme began to insinuate itself into the surgical activity, and Nick often mumbled words that sounded like prayers and organized religious funerals for his victims. (Nick's family are quite regular in their church attendance.)

As he chopped off body parts one day, Nick commented that what we were doing was illegal and we could be punished, but since we were just using paper people it was OK; he added that with pretending you could do what you felt like doing without hurting anyone. I was again being ordered to make tiny balls. I commented that he got to do all the exciting, scary things while he kept me busy with boring stuff; he agreed and gave me “extra” work to do. I continued to be puzzled about how to conceptualize this split arrangement, hypothesizing that perhaps my activity served a containing function that allowed Nick to explore more exciting and dangerous fantasies.

After our first break, Nick's play seemed concerned with phallic poking of holes into clay, masturbatory and pregnancy representations, and continued surgery. I continued to be assigned the role of assistant, and Nick's sadism in ordering me about was paralleled by his gleeful surgical attacks on our hapless victims. Material related to screwing and poking a pointed tool into a lump of clay, and his curiosity and aggression toward the hole he created, suggested Nick's sadistic fantasies regarding intercourse, and I commented that he seemed very excited by this activity. That these sadistic attacks also included me was suggested by his asking whether I had a night guard in my building to make sure I didn't get robbed.

Perhaps in keeping with the Easter season, Nick's surgery was later transformed into crucifixion, with his crucifying whole families, “suffering” them, with relish. When I commented on this transition from surgery to crucifixion, he eagerly agreed, adding that it

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was the surgery that gave him the idea and that he was doing it to paper people so no one would get hurt. Meanwhile, his sadism toward me became increasingly clear; in response to one of my comments about his liking to boss me around, Nick said, “You got it buster, you got it bud, I'm gonna relax, no work for me to do.” In that same hour, he directed me to write “Anne's dead,” and wrapped a string around my neck, instructing me to pull hard. I said he wanted to pretend to kill me, but he wanted me to do it for him; he responded “Bingo!” I suspected that I had been the victim of his surgeries and crucifixions all along.

As a week-long vacation of mine approached, Nick had us return to making “the littlest balls ever.” When I commented that we hadn't done those in a while and wondered why he thought of them now, he replied that he was out of ideas so we had to go back to the beginning to start all over again.

After my return, we commenced with making balls again. This quickly turned into bombs, suggesting Nick's rage toward me for leaving him. In meetings around this time, with Nick's parents they reported that Mr. D was feeling more assertive since he had returned to work, and that Ms. D was also working more hours. Nick appeared to be doing better; his temper tantrums had virtually disappeared, he was being more assertive with peers, and he was less likely to play the victim in his family.

Soon thereafter, Nick watched as his father suffered a convulsion brought on by a change in his medication. This led to more than his usual amount of explaining how various things worked, including his father's convulsion. I took the opportunity to comment on this characterological style, suggesting that knowing a lot about things seemed to make Nick feel better, and he agreed. Not knowing or understanding appeared to provide a major source of anxiety for Nick, leading to defensive intellectualization at such an early age.

As our first year ended, the recommendation for psychoanalysis seemed justified by both symptomatic improvements and even more by Nick's engagement in the analytic process—that is the richness of the emerging material, and his engagement in the transference. The second year of treatment continued and elaborated earlier themes, culminating in frankly oedipal material and some indication in Nick's play that he might be moving into latency.

Family life was rather disruptive during this second year. Nick's father had suffered a period of agitated depression during our summer break, coinciding with the loss of yet another job; he was spending most of his time in bed, crying, and was almost hospitalized by his

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psychiatrist. When Mr. D fired his therapist during the winter, Ms. D felt she'd had enough, and initiated divorce proceedings. In contrast to her husband's therapy, her analysis appeared to be helping her to disengage from the marriage. She was also able to find the kind of teaching job she'd been wanting for a long time, one related to her graduate degree, which would begin the following fall. I told her that Nick's treatment would have to address this very conflict, that is, his allowing himself to grow and develop even if his father did not thrive. Nick never spoke of these events directly, though they seemed to serve as the background for play in which castration themes were prominent, with Nick playing the “cut doctor.”

During the fall, Nick finally confirmed for me one of the many meanings of his forcing me to work hard making “the littlest balls ever.” He recalled our first meeting, during which I tested him. I commented that beginning again after our summer break reminded him of the first time we had met. He agreed, and added, “Now I'll make you work back!” This type of interchange—that is, the connection between Nick's making me work hard and my having tested him—came up several times during the winter of our second year together. His vivid recollection of the assessment and his subsequent turning passive to active seem to have been Nick's way of mastering that trauma (**A. Freud, 1936**).

Nevertheless, the making-me-work-hard-while-he-played theme was clearly multi-determined: it included the many problems his father had with work and Mr. D's complaints about having to work while Nick's mother refused to do so. Finally and perhaps most importantly, it seemed to represent a wish/defense configuration that allowed more exciting and forbidden material to emerge. It was as if Nick felt free to pursue excitement, curiosity, and pleasure as long as I performed a safe, containing function. Our different play assignments seemed to represent the mental functions involved in a variety of wish/defense configurations (**Rangell, 1986**).

Upon reflection, however, the data did not appear to support the hypothesis that my having tested Nick had significantly deformed the treatment. That aspect of our relationship certainly informed the transference, especially via the “work” theme, but its effects appeared interpretable, especially since Nick ultimately became so comfortable verbalizing his feelings about the assessment.

A frequent theme during the fall months related to Nick's conflict about being a “big” boy and going off to a “big” boy's school, including the choice between going on a school trip with his father and staying a little boy who got to have his mother to himself. He agreed with my

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suggestion that sometimes it was hard to decide which way he wanted to go, but added that he thought he was going to be tall because he was almost as tall as his nine year old sister. He also often played school, with me as the dumb student while he was the smart teacher, a further indication of his wish to move forward toward mastery, and a turning the tables on me with regard to the earlier assessment.

During this period Nick often said that I was his cleaning lady and ordered me to clean up his mess, suggesting the continuing preoedipal nature of the transference. Nick would be quite bossy, yelling at me to do various things. I interpreted his pleasure in bossing me around. During a particularly rich hour, I was a fish that he reeled in on a hook, leading me to comment that this was another way to be the boss of me, by “hooking me.” He responded by saying he would cook and eat me, which he did after noisily slicing me up. I commented that to eat me up was the best way of all to control me and hold onto me so I never got away.

During the winter of our second year, it finally seemed appropriate to interpret the most obvious genital meaning of “the

littlest balls ever.” Nick had for weeks been pretending to be Rover, my dog who went everywhere with me, including school, where he often turned out to be smarter than I. There had been veterinary visits with Rover, and some exchange of roles, where I became the dog. Many of the same separation and body anxiety themes had been enacted in this context. In this particular hour, I was Rover with a mean owner who forced me to make balls because I was a “working dog.” Nick meanwhile disappeared into the toy closet with the door closed for a long time. When he emerged, I asked what he'd been doing in secret for so long. Nick replied that he'd been playing with the dolls (a very unusual activity for him) and changing their diapers. Responding to a hunch, I complained that I'd been making these same old balls again while he was doing all the interesting stuff, examining the dolls' genitals, a word I knew that Nick understood and used himself. He offered that he'd been diapering the baby, so I asked if it was a boy or a girl (the doll had no genitals). Nick replied that he wasn't sure, but he'd check, and remained in the closet for a long time. When he emerged, he said he'd discovered that the baby was a girl. I asked how he knew that, and replied that she had a vagina between her legs. I commented that if she'd had balls between her legs like the ones I was making, she'd be a boy. Nick first looked at me blankly. (It was unusual for him to be speechless.) I remarked that he, after all, had two round balls on either side of his penis. He said no, a boy's balls are inside, and they sometimes go up and he can swish them

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around. Hoping for some confirmation of my intervention, I asked if they aren't sort of shaped like the balls I was making. Nick replied no, that my balls looked more like sperm, only they needed tails. Further inquiry ascertained that Nick was unfamiliar with the colloquial meaning of “balls.” He clearly knew the word “testicles” but preferred to refer to them as “spermy dudes!” I was left feeling that although the activity of making the balls had defensive value, their symbolic value might not have had the expectable genital meaning.

This hour contained the last enactment of “the littlest balls ever” theme during our work together. This fact requires explanation. Did my intervention resolve Nick's need to enact his anxiety regarding his testicles? There was little confirmation that Nick had understood the meaning I intended in my intervention. Also, if he had been anxious about testicular loss as *separate* from phallic loss, there should have been some evidence of that during those many phallic-like surgeries (Bell, 1961). If he were not anxious, about testicular loss, then I may have made an incorrect connection for Nick that enhanced his castration anxiety rather than reducing it (i.e., “You mean I could lose those too?”), thereby inadvertently driving the activity and its meaning underground.

Nick's surgery with paper people continued unabated from the previous year. As always, the figure was referred to as “he,” and we both drew various organs. Nick was the surgeon, I was the assisting nurse. Any organ could be chosen to be excised, though brain surgery was most frequent. During one hour, Nick commented during a brain surgery that in the hospital his name was “Mr. D” (using his father's last name), and he worried about how people would tell the difference between him and his father. I added that he might be practicing to be an adult like his father by pretending to be a doctor. Nick added that he was, except that his father isn't a doctor, he invests money. As the brain surgery continued, Nick reported that if his father drinks wine, a blood vessel in his brain could burst and he could die. He added that his father gets sad a lot, but can't stop it. In response to my questions regarding his comments, he answered that his father had told him these things, and that he had seen his father sad and “shaking.” When I asked how all that made him feel, he said his sister was scared, but he wasn't. I commented that kids sometimes get scared when their parents aren't well. Nick offered that the problem was that his father would never get well because his brain was damaged, he'd be like that for the rest of his life, and that's what was so scary for his sister. Since he had just instructed me to make a new brain to replace the one he was excising, I commented that it would

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be nice if he could make a new brain for his father like the one he was making for the paper man. Nick agreed, but added that the problem was that his father's brain was made that way when he was a baby, and there were no artificial brains yet.

At the same time, Nick appeared to worry that he too might have a broken brain. His anxiety regarding this possibility might account in part for the frequent demonstration of his intellectual powers. When Nick offered an elaborate and accurate explanation for some event or mechanism, I would often comment that he knew so much about how things worked (including bodies), and that perhaps it made him feel safer to know that his brain could understand things. Nick always agreed. His use of intellectualization represented more than an innate cognitive ability that he was able to exploit for narcissistic gratification; I believe it also served to reassure him about his own intactness.

In a series of hours, Nick demonstrated that he believed that growing up meant killing his father off. This prospect was particularly real to him because his father's depressive illness so often left him lying in bed, crying, unable to work. Seeing

his father thus debilitated contributed to Nick's guilt over his wish to displace his father and to an exaggerated fear of his own aggressive and sexual impulses. This conceptualization raises a second possible meaning for Nick's insistence that I always work and work hard—that is, Nick related to me as a stand-in for his father, working, healthy, and active, and in no danger from his murderous, competitive wishes. Making me work may also have symbolized his mother, who had returned to full-time work some months earlier. Though Nick seemed proud of and interested in her new job, he was unhappy about her lessened availability.

Indications of Nick's feminine identification, first noted on his psychological assessment, continued to appear sporadically in his play. He would sometimes pretend to be the nurse rather than the doctor, and his mother was concerned about a song that Nick made up about being a “mommy man.” It seemed apparent that Nick was finding it difficult to consolidate a potent male self-representation while his father continued to be so debilitated and his mother was the more emotionally stable, working parent. Whenever Mr. D asked me how he could help his son, I urged him to do whatever he could to help himself be well, so that he could provide Nick with a strong, healthy male to identify with.

The Rover theme continued, alternating between preoedipal and frankly oedipal themes. At times, I was Rover's inseparable owner (“You never leave your sweet Rover,” Nick said.) As time went on,

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the play became more and more romantic and sexual, though displaced onto Mrs. Giraffsky, a giraffe hand puppet that it was my job to control. Rover would hug and kiss her, dance romantically with her under “pink lights” while he declared his love. Finally there was a wedding, complete with the wedding march sung by me. I once commented that Rover sure wanted somebody of his own to love and to love him back, and it looked like it would be either me or Mrs. Giraffsky, since my hand was what made her work. Nick replied that it would probably be Mrs. Giraffsky because Rover pats and kisses her not me, clearly preferring not to undo the displacement.

The marriage was followed by many trials and tribulations, representing Nick's conflict between having a preoedipal versus an oedipal relationship with me, and the punishment he expected for an oedipal victory. Rover seemed torn between being with Annie, his owner, and Mrs. Giraffsky, his love, vacillating between the two even within an hour. At one point, after Nick made a dog license that would attach us to each other, I commented that this way Rover would never get lost from me. Nick surprisingly replied that Rover, in fact, wanted to get away from me, that Rover liked me but sometimes dogs want to be on their own. I commented that Rover seemed to have both feelings of wanting to stay with me and feelings of wanting to leave and have his own life; Nick agreed, and pretended to run away. Finally, the oedipal themes became more apparent and more persistent. Nick hugged and kissed Mrs. Giraffsky in the toy closet with the light off, he danced with her to romantic music, and asked me if dogs could get married. At other times, Nick would attempt to climb into my lap, lying all over me or putting his face up against mine. At those times, I pointed out that he was treating me a little like he was treating Mrs. Giraffsky, and that maybe he had some of the same feelings for both of us.

Nick often kept me informed about the status of his teeth, which ones were loose, why they bleed, why you need adult teeth. In one hour, Nick had me sit on the toy chest in the closet while he turned off the light and pretended not to know I was there; he started to drape himself all over me, pretending that I was a comfortable chair. Before I could formulate an appropriate intervention, Nick jumped up and turned on the closet light; almost prophetically, his loose tooth had fallen out on the floor while he was making himself comfortable on me. This hour was followed by one in which Nick, as Rover, said he had broken his finger while hugging Mrs. Giraffsky. I connected the broken finger to his broken tooth and suggested that maybe Rover thought it was a punishment for lying all over me.

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These hours were followed by themes of robbing money, which given his father's work and preoccupations, seemed partly to represent an attempt to incorporate his father's power. His behavior toward Mrs. Giraffsky began to alternate between romance and sadism, and I suggested that sometimes Nick loved her so much he hurt her. In subsequent hours, phallic exhibitionism became more pronounced as Nick used a long, flexible toy to represent Rover's tail, which had magical powers. At various times, I commented that he tried to kill me with his pointy thing, that his tail was quite magical, powerful and dangerous, that he could do both loving and hurtful things with it. I added that I thought that puppies want to be big dogs with big penises just like little boys sometimes want to be big men.

Around this time evidence of primal scene fantasies began to appear, especially the fantasy of stealing his mother from his father. (This happened to coincide with his father's frequent absence while traveling in search of work.) After a bout of being both loved and thrown around, Mrs. Giraffsky needed surgery. Her X-ray showed that there was something in her stomach. I suggested it might be a baby. First, Nick denied it because, although Mrs. Giraffsky had Rover as a boyfriend,

they were not married. Nick added that if there were a baby in her stomach, it would come out when she went to the bathroom, but then paradoxically commented that babies don't come out in that direction, they come out in the opposite direction, that is, vaginally. After Nick did surgery, it turned out that he had removed a baby from Mrs. Giraffsky's stomach after all.

By the spring, Nick's parents were in mediation and were planning to tell both children about the impending divorce. According to his mother, Nick appeared to be doing well and was expressing his feelings and desires very directly. As my vacation approached, there was no evidence of the previous feelings of depletion that had often expressed themselves as Nick's being "out of ideas" about what to do. In an hour sometime after his seventh birthday, Nick was teaching me a variety of things. I again commented on how much he enjoyed knowing things. He replied that he likes to learn things because it makes him smarter; I added that it also makes him feel safer. Nick nodded and said, that way he always knew what was going on, that most times he teaches people more than they teach him. I asked what happened when he came across something he couldn't understand. Nick replied that he turned it into something he could understand, that he would put it together with other things he did understand and teach it to himself in a different way. Nick seemed intent on reassuring himself that even in my absence he would be able to take care of himself.

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Soon after, Nick's parents told him and his sister of their plans to divorce. Nick reported it to me as a "very important secret." I asked what it meant, and he answered that it meant that his parents liked each other, but couldn't live together, and that there would be two new apartments and two new rooms for him. I asked if he thought the divorce was a good idea. Nick replied that he thought so, and so did his sister, because his parents fought too much in private and public, and he and his sister often felt embarrassed. When I asked if he felt sad about it, Nick replied that he felt only "a little sad," that this would be a good thing for his family, and went on to talk about having two Christmas parties.

Ms. D was beginning to wonder about a time for termination, especially in view of the increasing financial pressures brought on by the divorce. I had been wondering the same thing, given that Nick's school and camp experience had been excellent in the past year. Although Nick's mother reported some oppositional behavior at home, as well as the fact that he often urinated over his toilet seat onto the floor, she understood that her son was "pissed off" at his parents' travails and about having to move out of his familiar home and life. As she pointed out, this urination difficulty never occurred anywhere but home.

I would have liked more evidence that Nick had moved into latency. Although there were some hours when we played cards or engaged in some other more structured, less fantasy-laden activity, Nick had certainly not entered a stable latency phase—not surprising, given the current events of his life. His mother and I agreed that we would re-evaluate Nick's progress in the fall, after he'd settled into his new life and his school schedule.

When Nick returned in the fall, he was understandably preoccupied with the many changes in his life. His father was living in their old apartment until it could be sold. Nick, his sister, and his mother were about to move into their new apartment, and his mother had started her new teaching job. Imaginary play contained themes related to these events, especially to stealing money and winning the lottery. I commented that money issues must be more important than ever in his family, and he said nobody had enough money to keep the old apartment, so it was being advertised and that I should look for it in the paper. I wondered if he wished I could buy it so we could stay in it together. During one of these hours Nick threw me in jail in handcuffs, which he agreed to remove only if I promised to stay there my whole life. I commented that it felt like he couldn't be certain who'd be there for him and who might disappear, so he wanted to hold onto me very tightly.

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Around this time, Nick's mother reported that things seemed to have stabilized for her and the children, but that Mr. D was doing poorly and not seeing much of the children. Nick sometimes asked to sleep in her bed, which she firmly refused. She reported that Nick did not mention his father or note his absence, but he was clearly "pissed off" because he was still urinating over the back of his toilet.

A number of sessions centered around Nick's marrying me off, first to a proxy figure, then finally to himself. I wondered if weddings and divorces were on his mind because of his parents' recent divorce. He reported that in two weeks his mother would no longer be a wife, as the divorce became final, and that she had told him that she would begin dating again one day. With himself as the minister, Nick asked during our mock ceremony if we always promised to love each other. I asked for "time out" to consult with the minister: I said I really liked that idea, it made me feel safe, but I wondered how I could promise that since it was possible that we might stop loving each other, as his parents had. Nick said it was still OK to promise, since you can always get a divorce. I continued to be astounded by how elaborate his fantasy play was, and felt how

hard it must be for him to move into latency when he'd just landed the role of oedipal victor over an absent and sick father.

In a subsequent meeting with Nick's father, we discussed his own poor state of mental health. He had left his therapist in a rage and admitted that he felt neither able nor willing to deal with his children. After some rather stern words from me about his need to be in treatment, I offered him two referrals, which he promised to discuss with his psychopharmacologist. He never did return to psychotherapy during the course of Nick's treatment.

In subsequent hours, Nick decided that Rover's ears were broken, so Nick would be my cat, Melody, who rubbed against me, meowed, and had me feed him milk while he played with string. Assuming this new fantasy to be a retreat from his former oedipal position, I commented that being a girl kitty was sure different than being a big boy in his new school, or my newly married husband.

A sudden return to performing surgeries prompted me to ask Nick if something had happened over the weekend that had made him think of doctors and hospitals again. He reported that his maternal grandfather's body didn't make blood any more, and that he'd be needing weekly transfusions (this was later confirmed by Nick's mother); he then proceeded to give me a medical lecture on how blood is made inside bones. This episode led to several weeks of surgery,

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funerals, euthanasia, and the making of coffins. Nick's mother reported that her father's death was immanent.

During this first fall after his parents' divorce, their separate apartments, and Nick's beginning at a new school, his strong reaction to these events was evidenced by themes of hungry kitties, abandoned houses, adopted animals, and themes of repair. Yet he seemed wholly unable to respond productively when I attempted to undo the displacements and make interventions that connected his fantasy play to the real events of his life. Nick was clearly using fantasy as a defense against the frightening reality of his current life, rendering the balance between fantasy and reality more like that of a younger child than a boy firmly entrenched in latency. Some latency-like play would take the form of a game show Nick called "Stumpers" where he asked me math and science questions which I was unable to answer. I commented that he wanted to let me know how much he was learning at his new school, how much he knew, even though there were so many changes in his life.

Around this time Nick's mother reported that he rarely urinated on his toilet any more and that he had begun complaining about having to come to treatment. His mother appropriately suggested that he take the matter up with me.

The next few weeks were spent with fantasy play revolving around emergency fires that had to be put out. This play involved fire drills and Rover with a long tubular appendage at waist height which he used to put out the fires and "cool things down." I commented on how powerful his hose was, and Nick added that it had lots of controls on it. I finally commented that he seemed to be working on learning to control his hose but also was practicing so he'd be ready for any emergency that might come along. I wondered if he felt he needed to be better prepared for emergencies since his parents had divorced and his mother was less available. Nick responded that his sitter would take care of an emergency that came up, unless they could find his mother, but that he saw his father only on weekends.

A return to the surgery theme was probably prompted by the worsening condition of Nick's maternal grandfather. I wondered aloud if Nick wished he could do surgery on his grandfather to save him. Nick responded as he did to a similar intervention of mine regarding his father many months earlier, that there was no cure for his grandfather's kind of blood disease. Nevertheless, he went on to turn the surgery into brain surgery, with an autopsy to determine the extent of the damage. It seemed that he had conflated his grandfather's and

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father's illnesses, and despite what Nick understood intellectually, he was desperate to cure/rescue his father, out of love, out of a wish for a potent male to identify with, and out of a wish to feel free to surpass his father with less guilt. The poignancy of Nick's dilemma was evident in the compulsive, repetitive, and frantic nature of these attempted and failed surgeries.

Nick's dilemma was graphically illustrated in a surgery that required him to separate Siamese twins. I commented that it was a particularly important surgery, otherwise they wouldn't be able to live independently, that they'd have to do everything together. Nick agreed and reported on a case of Siamese twins who weren't able to be separated, so they died together. He then decided that he had to kill one of the twins in order to separate them. For Nick, separation from his pre-oedipal mother was a truly traumatic proposition because his only other identificatory option was a father with a sick brain. Alternatively, the surgery might represent a separation from his incomplete/deformed father, a kind of parasite, with Nick suggesting that only one of them could survive.

Around Thanksgiving, Nick's mother reported that he was doing well at home and school; his teachers raved about him, though his reading was progressing more slowly than might have been expected given his intelligence. (This eventuality had

been predicted in the psychological assessment.) The teachers remained unconcerned and encouraged Nick's mother not to be concerned, their expectation being that he would eventually catch up, especially given his sophisticated vocabulary. Nick's mother reported that he seemed happier and rarely tried to sleep in her bed any more. She also reported that the father's contact with the children was irregular and that financial concerns were pressing for a consideration of termination.

In the next several weeks Nick's play took on a definite latency flavor. He often played teacher, "Dr. D," which Nick pointed out was actually his mother's name in the school where she taught because she had a Ph.D. I became the more or less recalcitrant student. (His preference for identifying with his potent mother over his sick father was quite evident here.) Nick even evinced some interest in his mother's ninth grade girl students: he reported, giggling, that they thought he was cute, and that he thought they looked funny. When he demonstrated his prowess in driving subway cars and beating me in paper airplane contests, I noted that he knew how to do lots of things adults knew how to do, and in fact, that he was better than me at lots of things. Nick agreed. After he gave himself a gold medal while I got the bronze, I suggested that he really enjoyed beating me. He readily

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agreed that he was smarter than I. He even added that he spelled better than I did. (He'd graded my spelling tests as poor in earlier hours.) There followed many hours in which Nick was eager to demonstrate his capacity to surpass me in a variety of ways, and I commented on how much he enjoyed knowing more than I. I surmised that he was struggling to surpass me as his displaced father, testing my stamina and survival capacities against his vigorous onslaughts.

Nevertheless, it was striking how little reality this bright, creative, verbal child was able to tolerate, forcing us to remain in the medium of play as virtually the sole arena for working through his anxieties. For example, as the holiday season approached, and I knew he would be spending Christmas with his sister and father at his paternal grandparents' house. I asked how it felt to have Christmas without his mother for the first time. Nick replied that he had no feelings; I suggested that sometimes kids had no feelings so that they wouldn't have to have bad feelings. Nick looked even more pained, but said nothing. I retreated to commenting that it was probably hard to know how it would feel until it actually happened, but it might feel different from other years. With relatively few exceptions—for example, the brain surgeries as representing his father's damaged brain—attempts to undo displacements, to connect the rich world of his play with his real world, had limited manifest impact on him.

By mid-winter Nick was constructing "sturdier and sturdier" paper airplanes, frequently making "minor adjustments" to improve their design. I noted his adjustments resulted in bigger planes, not just sturdier ones. He laughed, and said that he wanted to sort out his cubby (which was filled to the brim) and begin taking things home "one at a time." I said it sounded as though he was getting ready to move out, maybe he was even thinking of leaving soon because he felt he didn't need to work with me any more. Nick denied this, insisting that his cubby was too full, but I took it as a sign of termination fantasies. Nick's phallic competition with me culminated in the design of a Concorde jet for himself and a plane he designed for me which he weighed down and called "the rock." (I couldn't help thinking that Nick's father was like a rock, continuously weighing down the family.) I obviously lost the contest, and he sadistically gave me a "loser's crown" to wear, and sent me to the "hall of losers" where everyone who loses against him, all the oedipal losers, wind up.

In a meeting with his mother at this time I learned that Nick was still having trouble reading: he could sound out the letters but not put the sounds together into words. However, Nick's school was clearly not worried about his prospects of reading, and urged his

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mother not to press him, counsel which she followed. I reminded her of the relative weakness in Nick's ability to sequentially process information, but I also wondered if his difficulty putting "things together" might also be influenced by the fact that there was a huge family secret that neither child had been told, i.e., that their father was still not working, despite the fiction he maintained that he had an office that he went to each day (he'd been given a small cubby by his previous employer to use for a bit longer, and dressed every day as if going to work). The children must have had hints and suspicions that all was not what it seemed, but were not being allowed to "put it all together." Nick's mother understood my point, but Mr. D was unwilling to admit his situation to the children, still hoping to find work soon, while paying the expenses on his new apartment out of his severance pay.

Nick's mother also reported that he had recently begun to complain vociferously about coming to analysis because it didn't leave him enough play time; when his mother suggested he tell me this, either in person, by phone, or by fax, he replied there was no point because I was a "dimwit." Ms. D indicated that her financial burdens would improve if Nick's treatment were to end soon, and Mr. D had not responded to her recent emails, including those related to this topic. I replied

that Nick probably would be ready to terminate soon, and we briefly discussed some termination dates, without coming to a firm conclusion at this time.

About a month later, after he had ignored my attempts to contact him, I received a note from Mr. D insisting that Nick terminate immediately for financial reasons. Parenthetically, the note, written in block letters, had the appearance of something scribbled on scrap paper by an eight-year-old, an indication of Mr. D's poor mental state. Although a few more months of treatment might have been ideal, this seemed to pose a hardship on the family. Ms. D was willing to pay for a two month termination phase on her own but felt that more than that would be difficult. All in all, the timing seemed reasonable given the state of the treatment.

Almost as if he anticipated the announcement, in a subsequent hour, Nick suddenly noticed some Lego illustrations and recalled making them very early on. I commented that sometimes when kids remember things they did earlier in therapy it means they're thinking about stopping. At first, Nick did not respond, but suddenly he began to recall making "the littlest balls ever" and drawings he'd done in the office. I told him that his parents and I thought it would soon be time for us to stop our work together; what did he think of

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that? He shrugged, adding that it might make more sense to stop at the end of the school year (termination was set for the end of February). As he spent the rest of the hour "tricking" me in various ways, and beating up my airplane, I suggested that he might be angry about the date the adults had chosen without consulting him, that maybe he wanted to stay with me a bit longer.

In a particularly poignant hour, Nick was describing how baby alligators get dangerous as they get bigger and can kill people. I commented that he knew a lot about things, including the fact that getting bigger can present its own problems. As he proceeded to tell me more science facts, he bragged that he even knew a lot about me because he was smart. I said "great," what did he know? Nick looked a bit embarrassed and responded, totally surprising me: "Actually, you're my worst subject." I wondered if setting a termination date had made him more curious about me and a little scared that he actually knew so little. Nick replied that he wanted to finish up some things with me, like a fishing rod project we were working on just then, and he asked me who I thought was the stronger. I said I didn't know, what did he think? Nick replied that he was stronger and smarter. I replied that then perhaps he didn't need my help so much any more.

In our remaining hours together, Nick tried to hypnotize me, perhaps as a way of controlling me. He made a camera, perhaps as a way of holding onto an image of me, and he furiously beat me in a number of competitions, all of which allowed me to tell him in various ways that it was fine for him to enjoy surpassing me. Nick also became curious about the date and content of our first meeting. He asked me to go back to my notes and tell him about our first hour. I did so, suggesting that it seemed as if his thinking about our ending also made him think about our beginning. Nick then used his knowledge of our starting date and our ending date to figure out that we were in our third year together, a good indication of his increased capacity for latency sublimation. These signs of latency continued into our last hours, with Nick telling me how to spell things, and keeping accurate track of how many days and hours we had left. At this moment of termination, his ideas did not desert him, even as the object was about to.

About one year after termination, Nick's mother called me for some advice, allowing for a bit of follow-up. Nick seemed to be doing well in most respects, with the exception of his reading ability, for which the school had finally suggested some tutoring. His reading facility was still not where his teachers expected it to be, given his obvious

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intelligence and extensive vocabulary. I reminded his mother that the psychological evaluation had shown that the sequential processing abilities required for a phonics approach to reading were not as strong as his holistic processing abilities. Nevertheless, I felt Nick should have been able to compensate for this relative weakness, given his other strengths. I suspected an additional factor, and asked about Nick's father. Apparently he was continuing to struggle along, without real work, but insisted on maintaining the facade that he went to a job every day. I suggested that the interaction of a relative neuropsychological weakness in combination with having to maintain a "family secret" might be interfering with Nick's ability to learn to read; perhaps he feared that he might discover some forbidden knowledge. I also added that I suspected that at some level he knew the truth about his father, but that Nick might be failing in such an all-important skill as reading so as not to threaten his father with his own success. I urged her and her husband to tackle this reality more openly. Nick's mother was sympathetic to my hypotheses and vowed to once again raise the issue with his father of the need to tell the children the truth. I do not know whether she was successful in this endeavor, and I have had no further information about Nick.

Summary

In sum, Nick's analysis was one in which a youngster struggled mightily and with significant success to allow himself to strive to equal and even to surpass a father who, owing to psychological and physical difficulties, was unable to provide a competent and strong adult male role model. His masochistic traits and his tendency to identify with his mother had lessened considerably by the end of the treatment. However, as his reading difficulties indicate, his future success will depend on the solidity of these achievements and the vicissitudes of family circumstances.

Although psychological assessment is often counter-indicated with a patient one will eventually treat, that circumstance did not appear to significantly deform this treatment, though it was certainly re-enacted in various ways in the transference, perhaps even in Nick's last months of demonstrating his superior intelligence as compared to mine. Nick was ending our treatment in the driver's seat, so to speak, quite different from how it had begun, when I had asked all the questions and had all the answers.

As to the "littlest balls ever" project, the sexual nature of this play seemed less important to Nick than its ego defensive function: that is,

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as long as I could be kept busy with safe, repetitive, apparently work-related activity, Nick could be free to explore more dangerous fantasies, including those that involved sadistic control of me and killing me off as a rival. It was almost as if his activity represented the wish, while mine represented the defense in this boy's characterological set of wish/defense configurations.

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